DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 403 067 PS 024 982

AUTHOR Hayes, Noirin
TITLE Early Education in Ireland--Towards Collision or Collaboration?
PUB DATE 96
NOTE 7p.; In: "Childhood Education: International Perspectives," see PS 024 960.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Information Analyses (070)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Early Childhood Education; Economically Disadvantaged; Educational Cooperation; *Educational History; Educational Improvement; Foreign Countries; Government Role; *Government School Relationship; Private Agencies
IDENTIFIERS Historical Background; *Ireland

ABSTRACT

An examination of service delivery in early childhood education in Ireland reveals that the lack of a national policy has led to a great variation in services, little possibility for assessing and regulating quality, and a very limited choice for many children and their families. This article describes Ireland's system for early education provision, including a historical summary, and makes suggestions for improvement. It begins with a listing of some facts about the system, such as: (1) most early educational services are provided by voluntary or private organizations; (2) state support is exclusively for disadvantaged children; and (3) there is no state regulation of early childhood services. It then explores the three branches that make up the system--the Department of Education, the Department of Health, and the community/voluntary sector--providing a chronological explanation of their involvement. The article concludes with a description of recent events that hold promise for early childhood education in Ireland (such as the appointment of a junior minister for child care) and a list of general suggestions to improve the system. Contains nine references. (EV)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☒ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

ED 403 067

EARLY EDUCATION IN IRELAND - TOWARDS COLLISION OR COLLABORATION?

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Eila Estola
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

Noirin Hayes
Dublin Institute of Technology
Dublin, Ireland

There has been relatively little written about the situation regarding early education in Ireland. As a result I found that in preparing this paper I was writing an historical overview rather than a paper simply discussing the current situation.

Before I begin my journey back in time there are some specific points about young children and education in Ireland that I would like to clarify. In the first place I must point out that I am talking about the situation in the Republic of Ireland and this is quite different, despite our proximity and common past history, to what prevails in the North of Ireland.

Some facts:

* Most early educational services (outside the primary school junior and senior infant classes for four and five year olds) are provided by voluntary organisations or run privately.
* State support for early services is exclusively for children considered to be disadvantaged in some way.
* Early childhood services are increasingly being asked to accept older siblings for after-school and holiday care.
* There is no State regulation of early childhood services
* Compulsory school age in Ireland is six years. This is in line with most European countries - however -
* Eightyeight percent of four year olds attend the junior classes of the primary school.
* All classes in the primary school are taught by teachers with a common training.
* Up to seventy percent of children are in class sizes of thirty children or more.

PS 024982

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

* Except in exceptional circumstances teachers conduct classes without assistants.
* There is no national policy on the provision of early education in Ireland.

As in most other countries an artificial divide between care and education exists in the field of early education in Ireland. For the purposes of this paper I will take each Department and discuss their involvement in service delivery and support. Graphically this can be represented thus:

Table 1. Important Dates in the History of Early Education in Ireland.

Department of Education

At the time of our independence Ireland was a predominantly English speaking country. After the famine years of the 1840's there had been a rapid decline in population, an increase in emigration and an increased dependence on the state for relief. These, among other factors, led to the very sudden disappearance of a language that appeared to have no value or currency in the world of the time. Once we became an independent republic the Department of Education set about redressing this situation and looked to the primary schools.

We have, in Ireland, a well established primary/national school system since 1831 and education has always been highly valued. Historically children attended school from as young as three years. In an environment where the vast majority of three, four and five year olds were attending the local national school the Minister of Education determined, in 1924, that the junior classes would all be conducted through the medium of Irish (Gaeilge). This

decision had a huge impact on the type of education thus provided. At this time, and in line with Britain and Europe, the curriculum of the junior classes was becoming more child-centred. However, when the predominantly English language trained teachers were required to teach through Irish and ensure that their pupils developed a skill in the language any innovation had to give way to a directive, prescriptive curriculum. The intention behind this action was that young children, so susceptible to learning, would acquire the language and, in one generation, we would overcome the past. Unfortunately the government expected too much of the school system which, at the best of times, is a conservative institution rather than an agent of social change. There was much opposition to this directive and by the early 1940's it was clear that it would take a great deal more to bring Irish back as the spoken language and the damaging directive was finally revoked.

Unfortunately this educational experiment meant that our young children in the 20's; 30's and 40's had not received a very child-centred programme and a review of the curriculum for infants was established. This led to the publication of the 1951 Infant curriculum which was much more in line with the educational thinking of the day. In school, at least, early education was getting back on tracks.

In 1971 a new curriculum for the whole primary school was published. In principal it was an integrated curriculum with a child-centred focus. In practice, however, large class sizes and little in-service support meant that the expected move away from the more teacher directed education took a long time coming. Indeed relatively recent research suggests that our teaching in all classes - including those for four and five year olds - may still be too directive and adult led.

The early 1970's also saw an increased interest in the potential of preschooling as an agent in overcoming educational disadvantage, a head-start, and the first purpose built preschool was opened. It was known as the Rutland Street Project and was supported by the Department of Education and the Bernard van Leer Foundation. This was a pilot project for 3-5 year olds in a disadvantaged, inner city area. It was evaluated over a five year period and the results reflect those of other projects with pupils showing an IQ gain which faded on school entry. A recent follow up of the original experimental group shows that there are grounds for believing that the project had a limited longterm effect for some. However, as with so many pilot projects, it remains the only such service of its kind in Ireland.

In the mid 1980's attention became focussed on the educational needs of our traveller population. Travellers are a distinct group in Ireland who travel from place to place and among whom a large percentage of children have only very sporadic school attendance. One of the developments was that voluntary groups, in an ad hoc way, began to set up preschools for young traveller children and received a grant from the Department of Education to pay for a teacher and some equipment. Although supported by grant from the Department of Education they are not an integral part of the department

and there are, for example, no guidelines of practice or curricular supports and advice.

We have no legislation governing primary education in Ireland and the government is anxious to change this. As a preparation for this the Department of Education published a Green Paper in 1992 and a White Paper in 1995. In the Green Paper very little reference was made to preschool provision except to make the point that by providing places for most four and five year olds at primary school the Department was satisfied that preschool needs were being met. This led to a great deal of discussion and heated debate among those interested in early education and it did have some impact. The White Paper made a commitment to establishing local Early Start preschools in designated disadvantaged areas. This approach was in line with the governments targeted anti-poverty strategy. The first eight Early Start preschools opened in September 1994. They were well financed, located in national schools where there was space and were staffed by a trained primary teacher and an assistant. Each preschool had sixteen children per group.

This action on the part of the Department of Education, which could have proved so positive for early education in Ireland, was undertaken with little or no consultation with those already providing preschool services - this set the stage for the collision of this papers title!

Department of Health

The Department of Health is mainly responsible with the health care of the Irish population. Under the 1970 Health Act the Department - through its eight Health Boards - is empowered to support, by grant, daycare services without which individuals might require residential care. This section allows for voluntary groups to seek grant aid for setting up day nurseries and family resource centres with attached preschools - de facto, therefore, the Health Boards support, where given, is for children and families considered to be disadvantaged. In the early 1970's there were less than ten such services in the Eastern region (the largest in the State) and at the time of writing there are up to forty. The Boards involvement with these early educational services is mainly as a grant aiding agency - they offer no guidelines and make no requirements with respect to, for example, adult:child ratio, daily programme or the training of staff.

In 1991 a Child Care Act was passed in which increased responsibility for preschool services was given to the Department of Health. The Child Care Act empowers the Department of Health to supervise and regulate pre-school services but the relevant section is not yet in place. Health Boards have, however, established Childcare Advisory Committees. These committees are responsible for issues relating to the protection and welfare of children up

to the age of eighteen and include a representative form the early services in their membership.

The expansion of the Department of Health's role in early childhood services over the recent past has led to a situation of Departmental overlap where Health Board nurseries or preschools are located in areas of designated disadvantage now being targeted by the Department of Education. In fact the Health Board's facility to support such services is so prescribed that they are virtually all located in areas of disadvantage and there seems to be a clear need for collaboration between Departments to ensure that funds are used to maximum effect and that services are meeting the varied needs of children and their families and not missing certain areas while overlapping in others!

Community/Voluntary Sector

Since the 1970's there has been a growth of the private and community developed early educational services. The most widespread are the playgroups and the Naíonraí (Irish speaking playgroups). More recently there has been a significant growth in private full daycare services - a sector with virtually no State support. This growth reflects social changes with an increase in the number of working mothers and also an increase in the number of lone parents. Many of the community services accept children who might be considered 'at risk' or disadvantaged in some way and receive a small local authority support for this. Funding is very limited and all such services must charge those attending a nominal fee. The recent development under the Department of Education are having an effect on these services also as the Early Start preschools are provided free of charge.

Collision or collaboration?

There are significant developments in early education in Ireland at the moment and it is an exciting time. These include Ireland's ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child; a Strategic Management Initiative at Departmental level which should improve inter-departmental communication; the appointment, in 1994, of a junior Minister for childcare - while he is mainly responsible for protection and welfare he also has responsibility in education and justice; and a targeted Anti-Poverty Strategy which emphasises that social, as well as economic, initiatives must be supported if we are to improve the conditions of those living in poverty, many of whom are children.

It is clear from the overview of service delivery outlined above, however, that the lack of a national policy means that there is great variation in services offered, little possibility for assessing and regulating quality and a very limited choice for a wide number of children and their families. We need, in early education in Ireland, to:

- develop a national policy in early childhood education
- create structures to support the variety of services necessary to meet the varied needs of our population
- review the training of those working with young children and break down the divisions which create tension and divisiveness across the professions
- review the curricular issues across services and debate openly what it is we wish for our young children

The answer to the question posed in the title rests with the Irish government. Ultimately it is they who will facilitate collaboration or preside over a collision.

Selected Bibliography:

Department of Education (1951) *An Naíoscoil: Notes for Teachers.* Dublin: GSO.

Department of Education (1992) *Education for a Changing World. Green Paper onEducation.* Dublin: GSO.

Department of Education (1995) *Charting our Education Future. White paper onEducation.* Dublin: GSO.

Gilligan, R. (1991) *Irish Child Care Services: Policy, Practice and Provision.* Dublin: IPA.

Holland, S. (1979) *Rutland Street.* Oxford: Pergamon Press.

Hennessy, E. & Hayes, N. (1994) *Early Childhood Experience Study.* Paper presented to the Psychological Society of Ireland Annual Conference, Kerry, November.

Ireland (1991) *Child Care Act.* Dublin: GSO.

Kellaghan, T. & Greaney, B. (1993) *The Educational Development of Students following participation in a Preschool Programme in a Disadvantaged Area.* Dublin: ERC.

O'Rourke,B. & Archer, P. (1987) A survey of teaching practice in infant classrooms in Irish primary schools. *Irish Journal of Education* Vol. 27 pp. 53-79.